International Conflict Management: Linking Scientific Research and Policymaking

by Sibylle Lang
KEY POINTS

• The gap between scientifically based research and government policy presents a recurring challenge to successful international conflict management.

• In Austria, Germany and Switzerland, scientifically generated insights and evidence in the field of international conflict management play a comparatively small role compared to other, more prevalent factors influencing policymaking in this field, including the logics of government and international politics.

• The “different-world” argument, implying divergent goals, working modes, career logics and “languages” or ways of conceptualising among researchers, on the one hand, and policymakers, on the other; “political” decision-making and the logic of governments; time restraints; and the complexity of the international conflict management dossier emerged as major reasons for the gap.

• Interpersonal trust-based relations and permanent networks; the operational relevance of the insights and evidence supplied; and academic and think-tank understanding of policymaking, on the one hand, and a culture of appreciation for learning and respect for complexity on the part of government, on the other hand, emerged as strong enablers of meaningful exchange and impact.

• Practical collaborative approaches; long-term, regular exchanges; and in-depth dialogue were clearly deemed to be more effective than written formats and one-off events.

• Some factors that impede the transfer of scientifically generated insights and evidence to policymaking may be difficult to change, e.g. divergent career logics or the “political” nature of policy decisions.

• Yet much can nonetheless be done at the interface between the two worlds by both academia and governments, by making better use of teachable and learning moments, fostering meaningful networks, and allocating time and money to this effort, even if the exact form of useful channels and formats depends on local conditions.

About the author

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Exploring the science-policy gap in international conflict management

If we examine the scientific insights and evidence that can be found in the field of international conflict management, on the one hand, and real-world policies in the same field, on the other hand, a degree of divergence cannot be denied, with state-building being just one prominent example of such a gap.

Political scientist Peter T. Coleman, one of the most outspoken critics of this phenomenon, has emphasised more than once that "This gap between the science and practice of conflict resolutions presents a dangerous challenge to the field of peacemaking today, particularly when it involves the high-stakes world of our most deadly, enduring conflicts". 1

A recent survey in the US has found that very few scholars (8 per cent) or policymakers (4.7 per cent) believe that academics and think tanks should not contribute to policymaking in some way. 2 At the same time, an inquiry at the International Conflict Research Institute into the science-policy gap in international conflict management – which looked into the Northern Ireland case and the United Nations administration – came to the conclusion that "The challenge of ensuring that research plays a central part in decision-making is more complex than getting the right research into the right hands at the right time". 3

In fact, the divergence between science and policy in the area of international conflict management can be assumed to be multi-causal, implying that there cannot be an easy, one-size-fits-all formula for reducing or closing this gap, while an ever-growing number of think tanks and similar institutions are officially working towards a situation where scientifically based evidence has a greater influence on policymaking, and are trying to mend the interface between academic research and governments.

The cases of Germany, Austria and Switzerland 4

While in the Anglo-Saxon space the “gap challenge” is being researched, 5 documented and tackled, in the German-speaking world this phenomenon has been dealt with only very sporadically so far. What is the situation in the three German-speaking countries of Germany, Austria and Switzerland? What is the extent and nature of the science-policy gap as it relates to international conflict management as part of the foreign policies of these three countries? What are the reasons for this gap, and what are the obstacles to applying evidence-based decisions and policy implementation to the prevention and management of international conflicts? Can specific requirements and best practices contribute to mitigating the gap between evidence and policy?

It is almost impossible to meaningfully measure the scope, quality and nature of the impact that scientific insights and evidence actually have on government policymaking. But it is possible to explore – in direct consultation with those concerned on both sides of the gap and at the interface between research and policy – the structural and tactical causes of a lack of transmission and translation of academic research results and evidence into policy, and to investigate deficits and best practices to improve the situation in this regard. Based on interviews with representatives of selected relevant parties and bridging efforts from all three countries, a number of essential categories and findings emerged.

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4 This section is based entirely on the author's own sources, i.e. 30 structured interviews with representatives from academia, interface institutions and national ministries of defence and foreign affairs during February-May 2016.
2.1 History, political culture and organisational aspects of foreign policymaking institutions

The first step is to identify the major factors influencing policymaking in the field of international conflict management. History strongly shapes political culture and values, which are also affected by countries’ self-chosen or attributed roles on the international stage; the thematic and regional focus of particular countries; their orientations and preferences; and, in turn, the actual level and modes of their engagement (which also depend on their capacities and resources); as well as the instruments used and activities undertaken in the field of international conflict management. In terms of the organisation of countries’ policymaking processes, the following major categories also impact on decision-making: size (small vs. large administrations); networked vs. hierarchical structures; popular participation vs. elite and strong executive decision-making; the existence and strength of specific conflict management entities and processes; the general structure of ministries relevant to the field of international conflict management (foreign affairs and defence); the existence of formal or informal docking points for academia and think tanks within ministry structures; and the education and mind-sets of ministry officials.

Beyond and in combination with these historical and organisational factors, several miscellaneous factors emerged that can heavily influence decision- and policymaking: individuals and political leaders who take decisions for off-topic political or personal reasons seem to play a large role everywhere, while domestic and party politics play a role in all three countries, although this differs in extent (Austria leads the pack in this area). Public opinion and media seem to play an overwhelming role in Austria, where these factors are said to almost replace formal policymaking processes in international conflict management, whereas in Germany they tend to come into play as a restraining factor when the use of military force is considered as a means to project the country’s foreign policy.

Among the factors affecting how decisions are made in the three countries in terms of the “if” and “how” of an engagement in international conflict management, it is worth noting that scientific evidence was not mentioned once. But we can also see that all the other factors mentioned above directly or indirectly contribute in one way or another to creating the modes and means by which scientifically generated insights and evidence affect policymaking and are translated into real-world international conflict management policies.

2.2 The role played by scientifically generated insights and evidence

Scientifically generated evidence and insights clearly played a very small role in international conflict management in comparison with the other factors mentioned above. Also, the vast majority of interviewees agreed that it is in fact impossible to trace this impact and establish causal relations between scientific input of any kind and policy decisions. What can be said, though, is that academic research results hardly find their way directly into policymaking. At best this occurs in very rare cases via individual, outstanding and interested academics who are part of a potential policy think tank-academia network or community in the country concerned. Think tanks, on the other hand, were credited with both the “convening” and “translation” power needed for access to policymaking, but were also attributed with only selective and not strategic influence. While governments’ tendency to want scientific evidence was recognised – although to different extents – it was also said that if the evidence provided showed ambiguities (by reflecting the complexity of a situation), it is less appreciated and used. The suspicion was voiced by academia and think tanks alike that governments and policymakers tend to commission or pick the ideas and input that they want to justify already given policy frameworks, i.e. they tend to use scientific results to legitimise already agreed policies rather than as the basis for generating policy.

However, all the countries in question clearly have thematic or organisational islands in policymaking in the field of international conflict management where scientific input is thoroughly taken into account and translated into policy design, at least at a working to mid-level of the government departments concerned. There was agreement that the real impact of scientifically generated evidence and insights on policymaking – and even more so on policy results – is highly contingent on individuals on both sides, and the extent of the interface is often coincidental. Scientific input seems to be in a better position to be used on a policy implementation level rather than
on the level of grand decision-making, because policymaking of this kind is overwhelmingly politically motivated, as a number of think tanks and government officials agreed. In this context, one interviewee described how, if a policy course has been set, any effort to influence policy with (adverse) scientific evidence is as effective as throwing cotton balls at a large ship sailing at full speed to try to stop it or make it change its course.

2.3 The type of knowledge, products, services, and formats currently offered and consumed – and what should be reinforced or added

Specific analyses pertaining to current topics and conflict countries and regions seem to be at the top of the list. Also, practically useful knowledge in general, e.g. facts and figures, bits and pieces of knowledge that are blind spots in the respective ministry, lines of argumentation, and answers to ad hoc questions within the framework of a current conflict management task are all part of the interaction. All the interviewees agreed that one of the great values of scientifically generated and expert insights is to provide a broader picture of a current challenge or task at hand. “If-then” statements as to causal relations between various aspects of a conflict zone or regarding certain action options were understood to be useful for policymaking, especially by academics and members of think tanks, while emphasising that the making of the actual decision is the job of the policymaker.

Academia and thinks tanks tended to point also to so-called “unknown unknowns”, while admitting that this is a tightrope walk between real agenda setting and getting to be heard in the first place, because a particular topic may not be regarded as policy relevant. Also, they would welcome the consideration of more hard-core data analysis by policymakers, but experience great difficulty in communicating this to governments. Government officials, on the other hand, seem to increasingly want strategic foresight assistance, and think tanks are partly responding to this perceived need. While so-called “theory” is categorically rejected by policymakers as useless in the context of their tasks, a couple of voices were raised among government officials and practical examples were even given to the effect that think tanks or academics/researchers could and should provide “live” methodological assistance and moderation to help the government departments concerned better deal with the complex challenges they face in the field of international conflict management.

Written formats, especially books, closely followed by studies (both commissioned and not commissioned) were at the bottom of policymakers’ list of actually used and desired formats. Administrators may read policy papers if they are no longer than four to five pages. While think tanks are aware of this, they continue to produce material presented in longer written formats as one of their core functions, because publications of this kind serve the important function of maintaining their state-of-the-art knowledge and demonstrating their professional competence. The Swiss think tank FORAUS tries to overcome the “reading challenge” by investing considerable time and effort in properly tailoring and personalising its mailing lists and offers short video summaries together with the papers its members produce. While integrating researchers into the policymaking process as temporary staff members of government departments may at first seem to promise good results in terms of integrating more scientific evidence into policy decisions, and has been tried in both Germany and Switzerland on selected occasions, this model was credited with only limited success, because individual academics and their inputs cannot be properly absorbed into the daily routines of such departments.

So what emerged as the most preferred and fruitful avenues and formats to communicate scientific expertise to policymakers and enhance the probability of its having an impact?

Firstly, direct, personal conversation and consultation are extensively used in all three countries, with the actual role and modes obviously being influenced by the degree of formality of the respective cultures and the size of the “knowledge and policy” community. Here the smaller Austria and Switzerland profit from more closely knit and manageable communities and respectively a less formal or participatory culture than Germany. These consultations can happen systematically or occur ad hoc when specific questions emerge in the policymaking process, but overwhelmingly build on pre-existing trust-based interpersonal relations and networks.

Secondly, events such as conferences and seminars can exercise a degree of influence. Here opinions diverged among academia, think tanks and governments. While all three groups agreed that events serve as important platforms for networking and establishing contacts, representatives of academia admitted that they were not involved in such events regularly.
and in a systematic way due to lack of access or other more pressing tasks. Think tanks and government officials agreed that beyond their mere networking aspect, events may provide knowledge about a particular topic, while offering multiple perspectives and a broader picture that could be valuable for policymakers. As prerequisites to increase those events’ potential character, interviewees mentioned the serial character, the joint framing of the topic, selecting a specific rather than too broad a question, bringing the right “community” together, and engaging speakers who have both excellent subject matter expertise and communication skills.

Two types of events were distinguished that could be useful in different ways. Smaller, non-public expert conferences and groups may enable a more in-depth and practice-oriented dialogue and were vastly preferred by government officials, academia and selected think tanks compared to thematically broader public events. It was conceded, however, that the latter may contribute to the visibility of a particular issue and to engaging and/or educating “the public” as indirect factors that could influence policy, although this channel may be of lesser significance as a function of the political system, the culture of thought in a particular country and the foreign-policymaking system.

Thirdly, concrete collaboration was favoured and seen as the most useful option by all three parties (especially in Germany and Switzerland). This could take various forms, including consultancies/individual advisory jobs, joint (longer-term) projects or collaborative workshops. Windows of opportunity for such cooperation and for scientifically generated input into government policymaking – both in terms of existing insights and methodologies – may emerge, for instance, when a newly established government entity that is tasked with a particular aspect of international conflict management (be it regional, organisational or sectoral) is being exposed to particular scrutiny and expectations to succeed (e.g. the Early Warning and Scenario-planning Department in the German Foreign Office, which was newly created after the Foreign Office Review).

All in all, the match between “supply” and “demand” in terms of scientific-policymaker interaction does not seem to be too bad. In fact, all three countries have specific models of cooperation, partly as a function of their respective political culture, administration size and specific policy needs, and partly because of the roles and ambitions of one of the ministries active in the field of international conflict management. To name a few examples, in Switzerland, the bottom-up, networked and federalised FORAUS initiative aims to empower young researchers to have an impact on policy and mobilising the population; 6 in Germany, the Collaborative Research Centre (SFB) 700 includes a “Transfer Project” with the Foreign Office to identify the main implications emanating from basic research on fragile states or areas of limited statehood; 7 while in Austria, the Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management/National Defence Academy is an in-house think tank of the Ministry of Defence and Sport. 8

Four powerful “enablers” of meaningful interaction that could heighten the chances of scientifically generated insights and evidence impacting policy emerged across all three countries and organisational types:

1. interpersonal, trust-based relations and networks or “communities” cutting across organisational lines;
2. the practical, operational relevance of potential scientific input, particularly when a specific (mid-to-long-term) task has to be executed by policymakers;
3. insight into and understanding of policymaking conditions and mechanisms on the part of academia and think tanks; and
4. a culture among policymakers of appreciation for learning and thinking that needs be fostered top-down by superiors and ultimately the heads of the administrative entity, and needs to be officially allocated time and space.

In line with these enablers, collaborative approaches with a shared goal, and long-term and regular exchanges characterised by true dialogue were deemed to be the most fruitful interaction modes by all stakeholders in all the countries under discussion. At the same time, all stakeholders argued for maintaining a mix of types of knowledge, channels/formats, products and services, not least because not everyone learns in the same way: policymakers are not a homogeneous group in this respect.

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8 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VY7Q9HnYKL4>.
Reasons for the science-policy gap in international conflict management

3.1 Disconnected leadership decisions, “political” decisions and the logic of government
The vast majority of interviewees, independent of country or background, pointed out that the greatest problem facing evidence-based policymaking may not even be the gap between science and policy as such, but a disconnect between decision-makers at the top and their organisations. Especially in large, hierarchical organisations, scientifically based evidence inserted at the working level may be severely altered or eliminated on its way to the top, where individual political leaders may also take decisions according to their own ideas and motivations. Ultimately, realpolitik and “political” decisions always defeat scientific evidence in cases of doubt.

3.2 “Different-worlds” argument – opposing operating modes
The “two-different-worlds” argument was also ranked top by interviewees, independent of country or background. Academics and policymakers have diverging ambitions, tasks and needs, and function according to opposing operating modes. Researchers want to gain insights and fill in self-defined knowledge gaps, while policymakers strive for practical solutions in their daily “decision-producing” work. The researcher has time to sit back and embrace complexity and explain it with no pressure to practically deal with it, while policymakers see themselves under pressure of time, organisation, conflicts at hand and constituencies, and are hence less inclined to make “deep dives”. In this context, one official described policymakers as “jet [aircraft] pilots who have a completely different time frame and flight altitude to researchers”.

3.3 Opposite career logics
Different career logics also impact the policymaker-researcher relationship. The researcher wishes to publish his/her research and obtain recognition within the academic system, which may even be helped by distancing his/her work from the world of policy and politics. The policymaker, with an average positional lifespan of two to three years, does not necessarily see the accumulation of knowledge and acknowledging the complexity of a real-world situation as a career asset. Instead, “muddling through” and providing quick “solutions” to peers and the public may be a better option.

3.4 Nature of scientific results vs. needs of policymakers – a “language” problem
In line with point 3.3, a frequently mentioned reason for the gap especially on the part of government was that the abstraction and aggregation levels of scientific findings are too high and such ideas cannot be used for real-world policy situations and problems. The methodologies used (an increasing quantitative focus) and hyper-specialisation further contribute to the irrelevance of academic insights. Lack of mutual exposure aggravates this gap, especially because a “revolving door” policy of the kind found in Anglophone countries that would enable a career to move among academia, think tanks and government exists in none of the three countries under discussion. With researchers often not having any insight into the daily activities, working mechanisms and pressing problems of government departments, common ground and a common “language” that would allow the interchange of ideas are hard to find.

3.5 Time constraints
An omnipresent lack of time primarily on the part of government due to operational conditions, characterised by crowded and tight daily schedules dominated by deadlines, was cited among the top reasons for the gap by all concerned. These time constraints severely limit the ability to consume and digest written products, as well as the amount of time that can be invested in engaging in dialogue or attending events. Some interviewees conceded that this may be a question of individual time management and prioritisation, however limited or enabled these processes are by the organisational culture and superiors’ attitudes.

3.6 Speed of developments and policymaking in international conflict management
Think-tank representatives in particular argued that the ever-accelerating speed of developments in the field of international conflict management, and hence of policymaking and decision-making, is a problem in its own right and has aggravated the research-policymaking divide over the past few years. Policymakers find themselves under growing pressure to come up with quick “solutions”, feeding into what was described as a “vicious circle”. Thus, interface organisations...
find themselves in a predicament: either feed this need for quick and unambiguous input, or try to consciously slow down the pressure and educate policymakers to embrace complexity and find nuanced answers – but at the risk of not being heard.

3.7 Complexity of the international conflict management dossier
Interviewees asserted that the topics of conflict, war and peace are highly complex, as is the policy dossier of international conflict management, not least because it mostly involves multilateral and international processes and networks. As such, a process of “muddling through” was described as almost an inevitable consequence vis-à-vis the complexity faced by governments at the various levels of conflict management.

4 Requirements for meaningful interaction and impact – food for thought

Some factors affecting the research-policymaking relationship will be difficult to change and may never alter. Nonetheless, a great deal can be done, while specific solutions need to respect local conditions, as was made clear by the comparative study of Austria, Switzerland and Germany.

A three-pronged approach may contribute to increasing the chances that scientifically generated insights and evidence will play a beneficial role in real-world international conflict management.

The first component would be to optimise the knowledge offered and the channels and formats for input and exchange to address mainly the interface players, although efforts will be required from all three of the parties involved by:

- making more systematic use of learning/teachable moments via greater collaboration than mere information and knowledge flows, and based on real-world problems and operational relevance;
- enabling and strengthening interpersonal contacts among the three parties in order to form “communities” and networks by utilising formats that promote real dialogue; and
- allocating time and money to create a space (see previous point) where a better mutual understanding and more common ground can be fostered.

The second component implies more systemic changes in both of the “two different worlds”, including adaptation of the structures and logics that were outlined above. Responsibility for action clearly lies with these two worlds (scientific research and policymaking), while existing interface organisations could support such a process with advice and moderation. One approach to promoting such a transformation could be top-down and systematic in nature, by implementing a mechanism for broader and institutionalised cooperation, starting in the research phase. Interviewees suggested different versions of a “joint council” comprising representatives of all the parties concerned, with an official mandate to identify gaps and areas of mutual interest. This then needs to be cascaded down to the relevant organisations and translated into concrete joint projects, thus ensuring ownership by all parties and especially the “end user” in a process of “trans-disciplinarity” that would improve the quality and usability of results while also enhancing mutual cooperation and understanding among the parties concerned.

Thirdly and finally, the bridging and potentially transformative component of executive training for government officials should be further investigated and implemented. Training of this kind conducted by teams of academic researchers, think-tank and executive education experts, non-governmental practitioners, and government officials involving participants and teachers from all around the globe, including conflict regions, could ensure multilevel learning in terms of thematic knowledge and methodological skills, and deeper mutual understanding, and may have a multiplying transformative effect on the long-term relationship between governments and academia.
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